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Workshop sifts through the realities of the search for Christian unity

by James Solheim

(ENS) The annual National Workshop on Christian Unity drew about 300 participants, representing most mainline churches in America, to San Diego at the end of April to take measure of the triumphs and failures of the ecumenical movement.

One of the keynote speakers, Professor John Erickson of St. Vladimir Orthodox Seminary in New York, brought what he described as a somewhat gloomy message, describing the retreat of Eastern Orthodoxy from the ecumenical movement during the 1990s. One factor, he said, was ironically the fall of communism. He quoted one Orthodox leader who said, "Under communism, we had to be ecumenical; now we can be Orthodox."

As a result, Erickson said that the Orthodox churches see a greater need to distance themselves and emphasize what makes them different from other churches. He also believes that ecumenical partners seem more interested in competition than in helping Orthodox churches rebuild.

Erickson said that another factor could be a certain lack of confidence in the effectiveness of dialogue, accompanied by a skepticism over whether any truly lasting agreements are possible.

A holy task

Other voices were more encouraging. Dr. Robert Welsh, ecumenical officer for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), said that he was amazed by the ecumenical progress he discovered after returning to active involvement after an absence of 10 years.

Among the advances he cited were full communion agreements between his own church and the United Church of Christ; a similar agreement between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and several churches of the Reformed tradition; a joint declaration on the doctrine of justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican; and a new phase in the Consultation on Church Union as nine participating churches prepare to launch Churches Uniting in Christ next January.

Welsh noted what he called "a new sense of trust and honesty in dealing with one another" but urged participants to "begin with a willingness to confess in humility in Christ that we have wounded one another." He concluded, "Division within the body of Christ is sin. Ecumenism is a holy task--an accomplishment of God."

Ecumenical integrity at stake?

The Lutheran Ecumenical Representatives Network (LERN) of the ELCA, meeting during the workshop, issued a Statement of Concern that addresses a proposed constitutional bylaw of the ELCA Constitution that would allow synod bishops to designate clergy to preside at ordinations in "unusual circumstances." The full communion agreement between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church, effective last January 1, stipulates that only bishops should ordain clergy in the two churches, although it recognized that there might be emergency circumstances where that might not be possible in the ELCA.

The Statement of Concern said that the implications of the bylaw for the relationship with the Episcopal Church and other ecumenical partners "represents a unilateral change to a principle established in a bilateral agreement. It brings the ecumenical integrity of the ELCA into serious question," according to the statement, which was shared with the board of the Episcopal Diocesan Ecumenical Officers, also meeting during the workshop.

The bylaw would "vest additional power in the office of bishop" and "clergy candidates setting the terms of their ordinations would create an ongoing division in the one ministry of Word and Sacrament," the statement said. And it would not serve its intended

purpose, "to restore peace and unity in the ELCA."

The proposed bylaw has been endorsed by the ELCA Conference of Bishops and Church Council and will go to this summer's Churchwide Assembly for action.

Partners in the faith

Lutherans and Episcopalians celebrated their new relationship at a Eucharist at St. Paul's Cathedral in San Diego, with Bishop Gethin Hughes of the Episcopal diocese preaching and ELCA Bishop Murray Finck of the Pacifica Synod presiding.

Using the story of Jesus instructing the disciples to fish out of the other side of the boat, resulting in a huge catch, Hughes said that Called to Common Mission is "the work of many people who were willing to fish from the other side of the boat," exploring visions of faith from a different perspective. "The concept of having a partner in the faith is foreign to most of us," he said, largely because of our individualism, but he expressed excitement over the "many wonderful dreams" of cooperation with his Lutheran counterpart.

He said that the two partners are cooperating in chaplaincies, campus ministries, Hispanic ministry, and in deciding where to plant new churches. "There won't be any gas station churches, two churches on the same corner selling the same octane," Hughes said.

--James Solheim is director of Episcopal News Service. This article is based on reports by Bishop Christopher Epting, deputy for ecumenical relations, and Frank Imhoff of the ELCA News Service.

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